

IOWA NATURAL HERITAGE

Protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife.

PUBLIC LAND

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Fantastic Fens

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INHF Land Acknowledgement:

As a land trust it is important for us to continuously acknowledge and understand the full scope of history that has brought us to reside on, protect and steward this land. The land between two rivers is home to many indigenous people, historically and today. We acknowledge the value of indigenous communities and work to honor them on the land.



ON THE COVER
Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) prefer moist woodlands like those found in this image at Katoski Greenbelt near Waterloo.
Photo by William Witt



Protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife.

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- Circulation 10,000



Conservation convergence

As Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation approaches its 45th anniversary, I have been reflecting on the wide diversity of projects we have worked on, and the many people we worked with to make them happen. True partnership is the only way to accomplish more protection and more restoration of Iowa's land, water and wildlife.



JOE MCGOVERN
President

INHF recently had the pleasure of helping to honor landowners that made lasting gifts to Iowa — now and for generations to come. Gift to Iowa's Future Day is an annual ceremony at which the Governor recognizes people who have donated land, land value or conservation easements "to benefit Iowa's parks, trails, fish and wildlife habitat, natural areas, open spaces, and public recreation areas and for other public uses and benefits."

We were privileged to work with seven of the honorees at this year's event, which took place in the rotunda of the Iowa State Capitol on March 14. The range of people and their motivations for protecting their land was inspiring. Some people donated land with the wish that it be open for the public to use and enjoy. Some people donated conservation easements that will keep the land in private

ownership, but ensure protections that will benefit everyone for years to come.

One such easement was donated by the McLaughlin family, who partnered with INHF and the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) to establish an Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) that will protect the open space and perennial vegetation on their property in a rapidly developing part of central Iowa and ensure the land is always available for sustainable agriculture.

INHF was created by Gov. Robert Ray along with conservation and business leaders across Iowa to facilitate exactly this type of convergence. We take pride in bringing together people and organizations that share a common goal of conservation. We continue to do that with the help of our amazing board of directors, committed volunteers, partners and members, some of whom have been supporting us for more than four decades.

We are grateful and inspired every day by the way YOU, our supporters, are part of these converging efforts. Whether by protecting and stewarding your own land, speaking up for conservation in the legislature, volunteering on the land or myriad other ways you use your time and talents to help nature. It all adds up — and gives cause for hope. With your help, we will continue to bring people together for conservation.

The McLaughlin family farm in Madison County — a rapidly developing part of central Iowa — was permanently protected when the family, INHF and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) established an agricultural land easement (ALE) on the property. Photo by Sydney Algreen-Hunter/INHF

Don't wait for the tulips. That's what I would say to anyone anxiously watching planter boxes or flower beds for spring blooms. The time to get outside is now! Yes, nighttime temperatures are still chilly, the tree branches still mostly bare and the landscape still seemingly dead and dormant, but au contraire. Cue Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers."

Hidden under the leafy mulch of the forest floor, many of our native wildflowers are bursting at the opportunity to be the first to share their blossoms. Some, like trillium, don't even pause for the snow to melt. And while the performance will be an ensemble of blooms in all shapes, colors and sizes, it will also be brief. They won't wait for an intermission. It's a show you don't want to skip.

Have you seen the squirrelcorn in the hills? The bluebells in the valley? Do you know the malodorous waft of skunk cabbage when it hits your nose? For those who are familiar, it's a cherished concert of the senses. Iowa's woodlands will soon be filled with the tango of trilliums, the cha cha of columbines and the ballet of bloodroot. They'll dance their way through winter's detritus giving color to the forest floor and sweet nectar to our native bees.

Don't miss their ephemeral entertainment.

— PATRICK MCNAUGHTON,
Blufflands Land Stewardship Assistant



Each spring, the blooms of eastern red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) serve as an important nectar source for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, hawk moths and other pollinators. Photo by Bruce Morrison

Deppe Family Conservation Area

Fundraising efforts to transfer a 127-acre property adjacent to McFarland Park near Ames are now complete thanks to numerous donors. Purchased by INHF at a bargain sale from Bob and Carol Deppe in 2021, the area will increase habitat for native plants and animals and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities. The park-to-be is now under the care of Story County Conservation, whose staff are turning their attention to elements like a trail system, picnic area, prairie seeding and more. Learn about the concept plan and when it's expected to be open to enjoy at storycountyconservation.org.

Saving the Slough

INHF and Polk County Conservation are still working to preserve Brenton Slough, an extensive 1,114-acre wetland and woodland complex located between Grimes and Granger. We're now over halfway to our goal, with \$5 million of the \$8 million dollars raised. Learn more about the project at inhf.org/brenton-slough.

Wildcat Bluff Addition

INHF is partnering with Benton County Conservation (BCC) to purchase 184 acres of land adjacent to Wildcat Bluff Recreation Area, which is owned and stewarded by BCC. This addition would more than double the size of this popular park, providing even more ways to get outside while protecting sensitive Cedar River floodplain.

Recently, the Myers' Family Conservation Fund announced they will match donations up to \$100,000 to help secure the addition and support recreation in Benton County. Now over halfway to the project's \$1.3 million fundraising goal, BCC is working to secure the remaining funds by May 2024 to avoid needing to reapply for already allocated grant funding. Read more about this protection project on our blog.

Call for Calendar Photos & Hagie Award Nominations

Do you enjoy photographing Iowa's wildlife and landscapes? We're again collecting some of the best nature images from photographers across the state for the 2025 INHF calendar. We'll be accepting submissions through June 1, 2024. Find an explanation of the process and some helpful tips at inhf.org/calendar-photo.

Know an outstanding conservationist that goes above and beyond? Nominate them for the 2024 Lawrence and Eula Hagie Heritage Award, which recognizes Iowans who have demonstrated extraordinary personal service and commitment to improving the quality of Iowa's natural environment and who encourage others to do the same. Applications are due July 1, 2024.

Visit inhf.org/hagieheritageaward to learn more and view a complete list of past honorees.

UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL 13

Crane Count
Polk County
Count Sandhill Cranes on foot or from a vehicle at Brenton Slough or Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt.

APRIL 13

Pasque Flower Hike and Workday
Kothenbeutel Heritage Prairie, Sheffield
Look for blooming pasque flowers then help restore the prairie they call home.

APRIL 20

Earth Day Trash Bash
High Trestle Trail, Madrid
Join Boone County Conservation, Friends of the Trail and INHF for an afternoon stroll as we collect litter along the High Trestle Trail.

MAY 4

Into the Wild, Out with the Mustard
Heritage Valley, Waukon
Join us for our 9th annual event as we hand-pull garlic mustard, an aggressive invasive species.

MAY 8

Mathes Woodland Restoration
Mathes, Pella
Enjoy an afternoon outdoors while we pull garlic mustard under beautiful oaks.

MAY 11

Kothenbeutel Heritage Prairie Workday
Kothenbeutel Heritage Prairie, Sheffield
Join INHF Land Ambassador volunteers for an afternoon of prairie restoration. These monthly workdays are held every second Saturday through October.

MAY 18

Spring Into Action
Fort Des Moines Park, Des Moines
Join INHF, Blank Park Zoo and Polk County Conservation to restore the woodland.

For more information, and more upcoming events, visit www.inhf.org/events

QUARTERLY PROTECTION REPORT

An quick look at new INHF protection projects and land transferred between **November 2023–January 2024**.

Newly protected areas

Hart's Bluff

27 acres of wooded bluffs near Council Bluffs in Pottawattamie County. Adjacent to protected land, the Hart's Bluff easement will expand on existing wildlife habitat and preserve sensitive ecological and cultural resources, safeguarding it from subdivision and other potential disturbance. (Conservation easement donation by Doug and Brenda Hutcheson)

Story County

A combined 305 acres across three parcels in the South Skunk River corridor near Cambridge in Story County. Each provide opportunity for habitat restoration in the floodplain and will build on protection projects in the area. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Winneshiek County

10 acres of upland and woodland habitat near Decorah. Adjacent to Falcon Springs WMA, this property will expand existing habitat, including for the federally endangered rusty patched bumble bee. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Monona County

191 acres of remnant prairie, diverse oak woodland and upland habitat near Pisgah in Monona County. Permanently protects an inholding in the Loess Hills State Forest and features locoweed, Missouri milkvetch, skeletonweed and rough blazing star among many other prairie species. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Johnson County

65 acres of mixed habitat near Iowa City in Johnson County. The woodland, pasture, wetland and creek will offer outdoor recreation opportunities and provide habitat for species such as Red-headed Woodpeckers, mink and northern leopard frogs. (Donated by the Walters Family subject to a reserved life estate. Proposed public partner ownership)

Echo Woods

60 acres of woodland near Union in Hardin County. Falls within the target watershed for protection of Northern Long-eared Bat habitat and would be suitable for Tri-colored and Little Brown Bats as well. Protection and restoration will benefit other wildlife species and enhance water quality for the nearby Iowa River. (To be owned and stewarded by INHF)

Boone County

31 acres of mixed habitat in Boone County. Adjacent to McCoy Wildlife Management Area and Ledges State Park, protection will extend existing wildlife habitat and recreational land along the Des Moines River corridor. (Portion of land value donated by Don Adams and Nan Bonfils. Proposed public partner ownership)

Fayette County

57 acres of woodland near Wadena in Fayette County. Adjacent to Grannis Creek WMA, protection of this woodland ensures water quality benefits to nearby Grannis Creek, a popular cold-water trout stream. (Proposed public partner ownership)



INHF recently transferred 127 acres in Story County to Story County Conservation. Story County Conservation is working on plans that include trails, picnic areas and more opportunities for outdoor recreation. Photo by Ross Baxter, INHF

Story County

42 acres adjacent to the Ronald "Dick" Jordan Family Wildlife Area near Ames in Story County. Provides opportunities for prairie restoration, habitat expansion and water quality improvements along the South Skunk River. (Proposed public partner ownership)

Land transfers to public partners

Rich Smith Wildlife Area

103 acres of grassland and woodland adjacent to Crawford Creek Recreation Area near Battle Creek in Ida County. This inaugural project for INHF in Ida County expands and buffers existing public land and will positively impact the water quality of a nearby public lake. (Owned and managed by Ida County Conservation)

Rolling Hills WMA

238 acres near Truro in Madison County. Safeguards the water quality of Broadhorn Creek, protects valuable grassland habitat and offers outdoor recreation opportunities. (Owned and managed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources)

Deppe Family Conservation Area

127 acres of mixed habitat adjacent to McFarland Park and Interstate 35 near Ames in Story County. Protection adds to current passive recreation offerings and provides opportunity for environmental education, while safeguarding existing grassland and woodland habitat from development. (Owned and managed by Story County Conservation)

Sedan Bottoms WMA Addition

32-acre addition to existing public land featuring riparian woodland in Appanoose County. Mature hickories and oaks along with oxbows and wetlands provide excellent habitat for amphibians, reptiles, birds and other wildlife. Located within the Sedan Bottoms Bird Conservation Area and the Chariton River floodplain. (Owned and managed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources)

East Fork Access WMA Addition

65-acre addition to existing public land near Livermore in Humboldt County. The riparian woodland and restorable wetlands will maintain floodplain integrity and build on outdoor recreation opportunities and habitat for wildlife species like river otter, muskrat and wood ducks. (Owned and managed by Iowa Department of Natural Resources)

Rooted in Service

INHF board members, past and present, ensure the organization stays true to its founding principles.

BY SUSAN SHULLAW | INHF Board Member



Dick Ramsay with previous INHF President Mark Ackelson



Gilda Boyer with Leo at her home



Seth Watkins with daughter Tatum on their farm in Page County

An acorn that falls on fertile ground will first dig a taproot deep into the soil. When firmly anchored, the plant will send green shoots skyward, beginning its decades-long transformation into a towering oak.

The oak became Iowa's official state tree in 1961. Not quite 20 years later, then Governor Robert Ray called together a dozen prominent Iowa citizens who became the "roots" of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Led by Bob Buckmaster of Waterloo and Bill Brenton of Des Moines, this initial group served as INHF's first Board of Directors. The board soon expanded to include more than 30 community, business and industry leaders from across the state, so that a larger number of Iowans could play a role in this new endeavor.

In announcing the formation of INHF in May 1979 "for the protection of natural resource lands in Iowa," Governor Ray expressed concern for how quickly Iowa's natural heritage was disappearing. Important and threatened natural lands – including wetlands, forested areas, river corridors, lake shorelines, and prairies – were being offered for sale, and the Iowa DNR and county conservation boards, which protect recreational land and nature preserves across the state, could not act quickly enough to purchase and protect them.

"We believe this private group [INHF], which will be able to preserve natural areas for the benefit of all Iowans, will be doing a great public service to our State, its citizens, and future generations who will live here," Governor Ray said.

Among the original INHF governing body was Des Moines attorney Dick Ramsay. He was the board's first secretary and helped file the necessary nonprofit paperwork. Now, 45 years later, Ramsay is still an active INHF board member – a very deep taproot indeed. His decades of service illustrate some of the ways in which the INHF board differs from those of other nonprofits.

"From the very beginning, INHF has needed and wanted input from the board on the operation of the organization, which is not all that common," Ramsay says. "Often times, a

board's main responsibility is to raise money. But at INHF, board members are much more involved in working with staff on the operation of the organization, and board members absolutely love it."

Given the complexity of many INHF land projects, Ramsay explains, it can often take new board members several years to fully understand the various funding mechanisms, land protection tools, easement requirements, and other aspects of INHF's core work. That's among the reasons INHF has chosen not to impose board member term limits. Ramsay himself, who's as passionate today about INHF and its mission as he was four decades ago, illustrates the wisdom of this approach: often, the longer one serves, the greater their worth to the organization.

Another long-term board member is landowner and family farm manager Carole Reichardt of Clive, who agrees with Ramsay's observations. "The deep level of involvement between board and staff has been the biggest difference I have experienced from other boards," she says.

"In my 32 years on the INHF board, many of the faces have changed but the culture of the board and organization has remained solid," says Reichardt. "I believe this is because there has always been a pervasive level of respect between staff and board. Both are centered on a sincere commitment to protecting and restoring Iowa's land, water and wildlife for future generations."

Geographical and occupational diversity are other hallmarks of the INHF board, whose 34 members represent every corner of the state, and bring valuable experience and expertise from multiple perspectives. Seth Watkins, who farms and raises cattle near Clarinda in southwest Iowa, joined the INHF board in 2019, after INHF helped him place a conservation easement on his farm.

"INHF has a level of integrity and diligence that has really impressed me," Watkins says. "Its ability to maximize donor investment in protecting land helped drive my decision to serve on the board. I appreciate that INHF has given me a platform to advocate for land protection."



INHF's founding members Bob Buckmaster and Daniel Krumm, and first executive director Gerry Schnepf with Governor Ray.

Gilda Boyer, an attorney from Cedar Rapids, joined the board in October 2022. "I have loved the outdoors my entire life," she says. "I was the kid who spent her time in the woods running around, skating on the creek in the winter. Today I dig in my garden and enjoy my 30 acres of restored prairie and woodlands. INHF seemed a natural extension of that passion, allowing me to serve an organization that works to conserve and preserve our beautiful Iowa countryside."

Working collaboratively, INHF board and staff members problem-solve, share expertise, offer guidance and also take time to have fun. Many board members will count among their most enjoyable INHF experiences the staff-led tours of INHF-protected properties, or the informal group dinners and social hours that allow board and staff to know one another better.

But those interactions steer clear of politics. From the outset, Governor Ray and other founders envisioned INHF as a nonpartisan organization. When INHF board meetings convene, members leave their political affiliations at the door. As the INHF team likes to say, "We speak for nature," because nature doesn't have a voice or a vote in its future.

What nature does have, as demonstrated by the individuals who make up the INHF board, are multiple points of entry. Some have come to their love of nature through agriculture; others as hunters, hikers, boaters, bicyclists, birders or environmental educators. Despite differences in age, background and occupation, members of the INHF board come together to serve a common purpose.

Just like the acorn that needs more than soil and sunlight to grow, protecting Iowa's natural heritage requires the knowledge, passion, and commitment of a diverse board to ensure that INHF fulfills Governor Ray's charge: *to preserve natural areas for the benefit of all Iowans and future generations.* 🌱

Working Lands in Working Hands

Former 'farm kids' partner with INHF to protect their family's rich agricultural land

BY BRIANNE SANCHEZ | Volunteer Contributor



When brothers Dennis and Stephen McLaughlin reminisce about growing up as “farm kids” in Madison County, many of their memories are tied to chores. Countless hours of their childhoods involved gathering eggs, walking beans, podding peas from the big garden, milking the cow and raising cattle and hogs “farrow to finish” among acres of corn.

“Then there was the time we were baling hay and got rained out,” Dennis recalls. “We all took shelter in the driveway of the double corn crib. That is, until lightning struck the windmill just 20 feet away. I never knew my grandpa could run that fast, but we all hightailed it to the house!”

“We spent quite a bit of time with grandpa,” Sharon, one of the sisters, remembers. “Exploring the farm, walking the creek... grandpa got in big trouble with mom once when he let us play in the mud and we came home covered head to toe!”

Farm life shaped all five McLaughlin siblings, but Dennis was the one interested in making a living on the land. He stayed in Iowa and helped his parents, Lewis and Margaret, weather the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. It was a time when some of their neighbors were forced to sell.

“We’ve just focused on the home place, 320 acres, and tried to make it farm better—not bigger,” Dennis says. “A lot of it was substituting labor for capital. That wasn’t always fun, but that’s what got the bills paid.”

A longtime member of Practical Farmers of Iowa, Dennis continues to advance his parents’ land ethic by investing his efforts into regenerative practices. Preserving grasslands and habitat on the property also benefits the greater Badger Creek watershed and maintains open space.

“Dad was an early adopter of conservation in cooperation with the NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and the FSA (Farm Service Agency),” Dennis says. “Together they built ponds, diversions, contour terraces and seeded waterways. Today’s efforts focus on improving soil biology which will in turn improve water filtration rates, water holding capacity, soil organic

carbon and overall soil health scores. Adaptive rotational grazing is practiced on all 320 acres.”

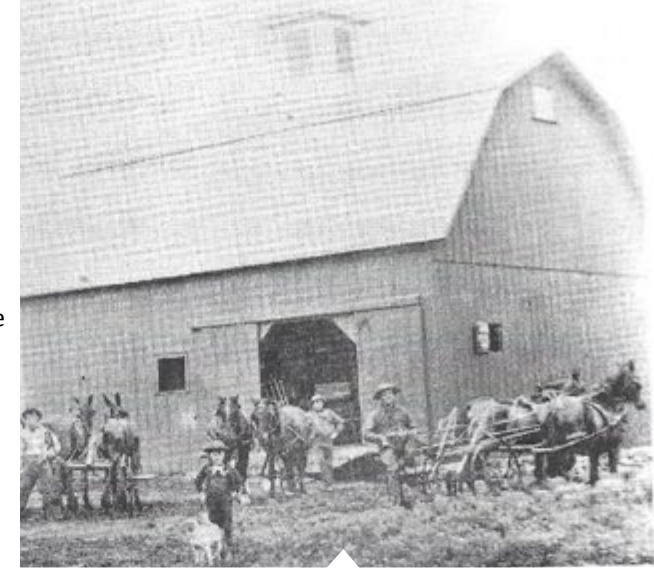
In the decades since the McLaughlin siblings and their Madison County classmates would hop off the school bus and head into the fields, much has changed. Developers are at their doorstep, with new subdivisions popping up at the edges of the property and a nearby data center converting cropland into developed spaces. Family members were concerned that, as surrounding communities expanded, their farm would be lost. The threat to agricultural production and wildlife habitat would be significant.

Finding a preservation partner

Holding onto the farm, which was first conveyed to John and Mary McLaughlin in 1854, has required five generations of familial commitment. With Dennis eyeing retirement, and no successor interested in running farming operations, the family needed to come up with a plan for the property. They formed an LLC in 2008, to collectively consider their options and ensure the continued stewardship of the land.

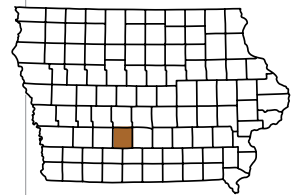
“Everybody understood that we had to educate ourselves,” Dennis says. “Part of the formation of the LLC incorporated the possibility of eventually working with a land trust. We decided it might be a good fit, if it meant that we did everything we could to preserve the agricultural land and natural resources.”

The McLaughlins researched organizations with expertise in land easements, in search of a potential partner. Eventually, they connected with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and in 2016 began working with Erin Van Waus, INHF Conservation Easement Director. Her work involves helping the family navigate the legal aspects, ecological elements and the relationship dynamics associated with complex land protection decisions. She’s



This barn still stands at the McLaughlin farm today. Charles McLaughlin, grandfather of the five McLaughlin siblings, is pictured with his dog in the foreground.

McLaughlin Farm Madison County



LAND: 320 acres (107 protected with an easement) utilizing adaptive rotational grazing, row crops and cover crops

SPECIAL FEATURES: Family farm with a strong focus on conservation practices, includes a historic one-room school house

PARTNERS: McLaughlin family members, INHF and NRCS

Siblings Dennis, Cecilia and Steve gather at the family farm after signing documents to protect it.



Middle left: The five McLaughlin siblings—Dennis, Cecilia, Sharon, Steve and Donna—sit with their parents Lewis and Margaret. **Middle right:** As children, the siblings spent many days outdoors exploring and helping on the farm. **Bottom:** A birds-eye-view shows the diversity of crops and cover planted on the farm.

Learn more about Agricultural Land Easements (ALEs)

What is an ALE?

An ALE is an optional enrollment program administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service to protect agricultural lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses such as housing developments. An ALE is a permanent protection tool that is recorded and remains in effect even if the land is sold.

As part of the program, landowners work with a local organization—referred to as an eligible entity—who is responsible for the long-term stewardship of the easement. INHF is an eligible entity and has partnered with landowners across the state to help apply for easement funding. INHF is responsible for annually monitoring the easement property.

What type of lands qualify for ALE protection?

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) dictates the qualifications for the ALE program. Land must be privately owned or Tribal land. Some of the land types that typically are eligible for protection with the ALE program include grasslands, pasturelands, cropland, shrubland and non-industrial forest land.

What are the benefits for the land?

The benefits of an ALE vary based on the type of land but often include environmental quality, historical protection, wildlife habitat, protection of open space and long-term viability of the nation's food source.

What are the benefits for the landowner?

Beyond the intrinsic value of protecting land, there is a financial benefit to an ALE. Landowners who participate in the ALE's program receive tax benefits and payment.

How do I get started with an ALE?

Contact INHF's Conservation Easement Director Erin Van Waus at evanwaus@inhf.org or 515-288-1846 ext. 29. We'll guide you through the entire process from learning if you're eligible to applying and finally signing your easement. The process can take up to two years.

Learn more about your land protection options at iowalandoptions.org, an INHF initiative. You can also visit nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/ale-agricultural-land-easements for more information about ALEs from the NRCS.

facilitated more than 70 conservation easements in her tenure, on completion timelines that range from within a year to occasionally spanning decades.

"Oftentimes landowners contact INHF because they want the peace of mind knowing their work won't be undone and the trees, pastures and open fields will remain beyond their ownership," Van Waus says. "Protection may be triggered by nearby land uses, estate planning or sometimes in advance of selling the property."

For those with working lands, Agricultural Land Easements (ALEs) may be the best way to protect beloved pastures and fields. In ALEs, the NRCS provides a payment for 50% of the easement value, and the remaining 50% of the easement value can be offset by state and federal tax benefits.

"ALEs are the best financial option for landowners interested in preserving working lands with an easement," Van Waus says. "You have to also be interested in preserving conservation and understand all of the stacked benefits. It also protects a way of life, by not squeezing farmers out of this area of high development."

"For us, it felt like the right decision. We're only here for a short time, filling in the gap between who was here before and who will come next," Dennis says. "This land has a long history, and the ALE means it can also have a long future."

Working close to home

In 2021, INHF was awarded funding through the NRCS for an ALE to protect 107 acres of the McLaughlin Farm. As part of the agreement, the McLaughlin Family donated 50 percent of the easement value and agreed to contribute toward the easement monitoring fund, which helps cover the expense of ensuring land use compliance perpetually. It's an outcome that the McLaughlin siblings could celebrate, after years of collaborative conversations.

"I had already come to the decision that this was the only way to protect the land from the development that was happening all around us," Sharon says about the family's choice to do the easement. "I knew it was what Dad and

Mom wanted and I know they are very happy that we made it happen."

"When doing an easement by committee you have to allow more time for discussions and decision making, but it's also so rich and gratifying," Van Waus says. "The process for the agricultural land easement is lengthy compared to donated conservation easements because funding from the federal government is involved. The McLaughlin family was committed to see the land protection through and we were able to finalize the easement in 2023."

Their ALE still allows for activities the McLaughlins value, including sustainable grazing, row cropping in designated areas and fruit, nut and vegetable production. But it also protects against activities like development, mining or subdividing. The farm's perennial vegetation, woodland and small stream will collectively provide for sustainable farming practices, clean water and wildlife habitat.

"When you look at the aerial view of the farm, it's unique," Van Waus says. "There are a bunch of different colors and patterns indicating diverse crop rotations and conservation practices. It's exciting to see this much diversity on a farm."

Working on the McLaughlin's easement was especially meaningful for Van Waus because the property is located close to her home, in the same school district her children attend. In the seven years it took to finalize the conservation easement, she's seen her young sons grow up alongside the grasslands. Van Waus brought her husband and kids along for field studies to help identify birds, trees and other plants for documentation purposes.

"Easements like this one are a great way for INHF to continue to fulfill our mission through private land protection," Van Waus says. "Wildlife and water quality don't care who owns the land. It just matters that it's protected." 🌿

"We're only here for a short time, filling in the gap between who was here before and who will come next. This land has a long history, and the ALE means it can also have a long future."

— DENNIS MCLAUGHLIN

Fantastic Fens

“I felt as though I stepped into the past when I walked out there because we never find wetlands like this any more in this part of the state.”

Fens are one of Iowa’s rarest landscapes. While typically small in size, fens pack a large and diverse number of unique animals and plants. Recognizing their ecological importance, INHF works hand-in-hand with landowners to ensure these vital habitats remain protected.

BY LARRY STONE | *Special to INHF*

The protection of one of the finest remaining fens in Iowa serves as an example of what INHF does best: recognizing critical natural areas and giving landowners the opportunity to benefit from the protection of those unique sites.

Finest remaining FEN? So, what is a fen? And why are they so special? Soil maps say they occur in “Klossner muck” – which doesn’t sound very appealing!

But that “muck” soil, consisting of decayed vegetation kept saturated by cold underground seeps or springs, may host an abundance of unusual flora, ranging from rare orchids and other wildflowers to sage willows to a variety of sedges. Iowa fens support more than 200 species of plants, at least 40 of which are considered rare. Some of the plants grow only in fens.

Fens also provide habitat for many species of wetland birds, amphibians and reptiles, as well as some insects and snails that are limited to fens.



INHF protected 155 acres in Fayette County which includes a fen, sedge meadow and woodland. The fen was discovered after attempts to drain and farm the land.

John Pearson and Mark Leoschke concluded that prior to European settlement there were more than 2,300 fens in 30 eastern and northeastern Iowa counties, along with a handful of the distinctive habitats in northwest and north-central Iowa.

Pearson said the hillside location also can be characteristic of many fens. “Unlike ‘normal’ wetlands – potholes, sloughs, swamps, and streams – that occupy the lowest parts of the landscape where runoff flows, fens arise from groundwater seepage high on the lay of the land,” Pearson wrote in an essay in the book “Deep Nature.”

Pearson described his excitement as he approached one site where soil maps hinted there could be a fen:

“There it is! A bright green mound of vegetation gleams softly amid the black soil of the cropfield like an emerald dropped in the dirt.”

Yes, the fen was still there, Pearson marveled: “... an ark of nature awash and alone in a flood of rowcrop agriculture.”

Nekola decried the loss of most fen sites to agriculture. It once was considered a good farming practice to try to drain the fertile wetlands to plant corn or other crops. Livestock also can damage fens. Heavily grazed fens may be dotted with raised hummocks, where cattle have trampled the wet soil.

Thus, it was no surprise that the fen most recently protected by INHF faced an uncertain future. Old aerial photos and on-the-ground exploring show remnants of ditches that apparently were failed past attempts to drain the area. Previous landowners planted crops in parts of the tract, but most of the small fields had been abandoned, probably due to poor crop yields.

When a northeast Iowa family of dairy farmers acquired the land, they again sought ways to make the farm more economically viable. But after consulting with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the

landowners learned it might not be feasible to comply with state and federal permits required for altering the wetland.

NRCS staff recognized the high quality of the fen and surrounding natural area. “I felt as though I stepped into the past when I walked out there,” said one NRCS employee, “because we never find wetlands like this any more in this part of the state.” To assist the family in exploring other options for the land, the agency suggested contacting Brian Fankhauser, Senior Land Stewardship and Blufflands Director for INHF.

Fankhauser visited the site and met with the family several times. Ultimately, the family chose to sell the 155-acre tract — which included more than 46 acres of fen and sedge meadow — to INHF. Both parties considered the transaction a win-win: the natural area was saved, and the family received cash for land that did not benefit their farming operation.

As part of the agreement, the family continues to plant crops in a 15-acre field that does not impact the natural area. Fankhauser said INHF eventually plans to inter-seed prairie vegetation in the abandoned crop fields, which now have grown up into a mix of introduced and native grasses and forbs that host grassland nesting birds. Meanwhile, INHF staff, interns and volunteer crews will focus on controlling invasive species, such as buckthorn and honeysuckle, in the 41-acre woodland. While the woodland had been grazed in the past, it still contains a diverse mixture of oaks, quaking aspen, black cherry, shagbark hickory, hackberry, hazelnut and other species that offer good wildlife habitat.

Although the fen will not be open for regular public use, Fankhauser said INHF will conduct field days at the site to help educate people about natural area management in general, and fen ecology in particular.

The site supports at least 6 species of uncommon plants that are indicators of a good quality fen, such as tall cotton grass, fringed gentian and northern adder’s-tongue, according to surveys by Nekola, Pearson and Leoschke.

Don’t forget the wildlife, Nekola noted. He fondly recalled hearing an American bittern – a



American Bittern, photo by Larry Reis



Baltimore checkerspot, photo by Larry Reis

Geologically, fens form when precipitation and surface water soak down through sand or gravel to accumulate above a layer of impermeable clay or shale. The water then flows underground above that barrier before emerging, often on a hill slope. At that location, the resulting organic soil can become so waterlogged it may be spongy to walk on – almost like a waterbed. The ground moves.

The water can become alkaline as it dissolves carbonate minerals underground. In some fens, that leaves a crusty calcium carbonate deposit called tufa at the soil surface. In almost all Iowa fens, plants get most of their nutrients from that mineral-rich water.

Botanist Jeff Nekola, who now is an associate professor at Masaryk University, in the Czech Republic, began studying fens in the northeastern part of Iowa as a Coe College student in the 1980s. His innovative approach of locating fens by using soil maps also has been used by other ecologist to locate natural areas – especially in northeastern Iowa. Although most fens can be found in the northern latitudes world-wide, some may be found as far south as Texas and Georgia. Prior to Nekola’s work, Iowa’s best-known fens were Silver Lake Fen State Preserve and Excelsior Fen, both in northwest Iowa’s Dickinson County.

By poring over soil maps, Nekola and Iowa Department of Natural Resources botanists

wetland bird whose populations are declining because of habitat loss. And he noted that a state-endangered species of butterfly, the Baltimore checkerspot, survives mostly in fens. Nekola also used DNA sequencing and critical analysis of the shell structure to identify a new species of snail he found on a different fen.

Nekola is so passionate about the ecology of fens that he bought land that included a fen in Fayette County, just to save it from drainage tile and the plow. He and INHF now jointly own and manage that site, which protects a small fen in a 13-acre natural area. INHF also has helped protect several other fens throughout the state.

Muck? Perhaps. But Iowa’s fens are some of our most unique and diverse natural areas. 🦋

See for yourself

INHF has helped to protect numerous fens across the state that are now open to the public. Find one near you!

Silver Lake Fen

Dickinson County
An easily accessible fen that supports over 100 plant species including orchids.

Forever Fen

Franklin County
Maintained paths allow visitors the chance to see rare plant species and wildlife up close.

Hartley Heritage Fen

Jasper County
Participate in regular programming or explore on your own.

Ciha Fen

Johnson County
One of only two documented nutrient-poor fens in Iowa.



PUBLIC LAND: DOES IOWA HAVE ENOUGH?

Pony Creek Park in Mills County, seen above, expanded by 30 acres in 2016. INHF helped acquire the land — adjacent to Mills County Conservation headquarters near Glenwood — from Allen and Margaret Hahn. The purchase of the addition was aided by a \$100,000 donation through INHF by Marilyn and Jim Schroer, friends of the Hahns. The Hahns spent many years actively restoring the land on their own to native vegetation, including areas of prairie and timber.

BY ERICA PLACE
Communications Specialist | eplace@inhf.org

What do you think of when you hear the words “public land?”

For nature lovers in Iowa, it means parks, trails and wildlife areas. Places people depend on for outdoor recreation; wildlife and plants depend on for their homes; and Iowa depends on for economic vitality. Places protected for future generations to enjoy.

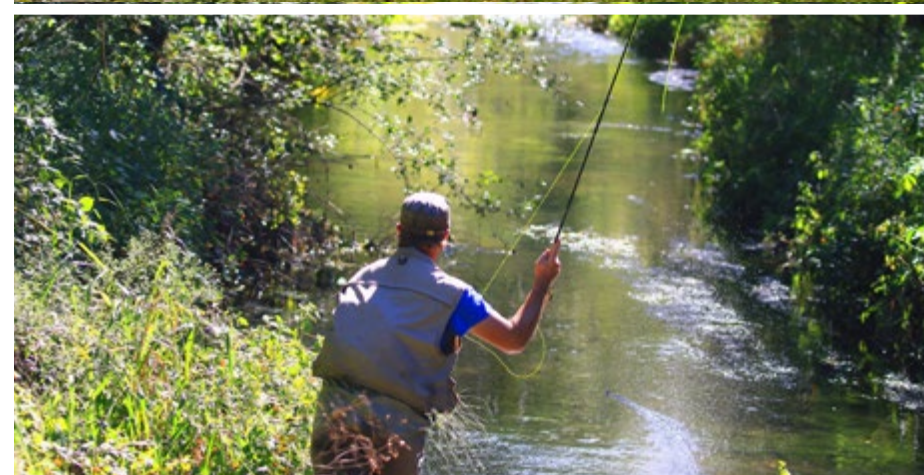
Fruitful trout streams, scenic loess ridges, winding trails and serene state forests are found across Iowa. Well known and well-traveled places like Lake Rathbun, the Wabash Trace Nature Trail or Wikiup Hill. Hidden gems like White Pine Hollow State Preserve. Small-town community fixtures like the neighborhood trail.

The Iowa Economic Development Authority

(IEDA), a state department charged with making Iowa the right choice for people and businesses, has published multiple studies that show natural landscapes and outdoor recreation are among the top five factors that influence a person’s decision where to live. Two-thirds of respondents in a 2018 IEDA study named Iowa’s state and county parks as a reason why Iowa is a desirable place to visit.

The Iowa Tourism Office, part of IEDA, recognized this as an opportunity for a marketing campaign to increase tourism. They began using images that focused on outdoor recreation in their outreach to potential visitors. People in beautiful Iowa places showed up on billboards and social media, in print and digital ads and more. The results speak for themselves.

The campaign made it 80% more likely that U.S. travelers would visit Iowa. It didn’t just have an impact on those who live across the



country — sixty-four percent of people living in states that border Iowa said the campaign either gave them new information or changed their perception about Iowa.

Clearly, Iowa’s public natural areas are important for residents and visitors. And we should be proud that we have some great ones. The question is: Do we have enough?

“Where we rank in the country for amount of public land isn’t the measurement I’m worried about,” says Joe McGovern, INHF President. “It’s not a competition. What I do care about is, ‘Do we have enough parks, trails and wildlife areas to meet the needs of Iowans for outdoor recreation, soil health or water quality? Do we have enough to attract and retain workforce? Do we have enough to sustain our wildlife and plants? Is this a place people want to move to?’ I don’t believe we’re there yet.”

Iowa has tremendous opportunity to

“Do we have enough parks, trails and wildlife areas to meet the needs of Iowans for outdoor recreation, soil health or water quality? Do we have enough to attract and retain workforce? Do we have enough to sustain our wildlife and plants? Is this a place people want to move to? I don’t believe we’re there yet.”

— JOE MCGOVERN, INHF PRESIDENT

enhance conservation and outdoor recreation. Investing in natural resources and the need for more parks, trails and wildlife areas is key for helping our communities meet their full potential and enriching our quality of life.

Read more about the stacked benefits of public parks, trails and wildlife areas on pages 20-21.

The stacked benefits of parks, trails and wildlife areas

Public lands support workforce development and economic vitality

Originally from Indiana, Mike Webb has called Iowa home for the last 16 years. While a job brought him to Iowa, it wasn't his only consideration.

"Among the first thoughts I had when I moved to Iowa was 'Where am I going to deer hunt this fall?'" Mike recalls.

Mike volunteers on the board of directors for the Iowa chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, and he has observed it's getting harder for those new to the outdoors to find access of their own.

"We have more people vying for space in our parks and wildlife areas. The demand is going to keep going up," he says.

Iowa's public hunting and fishing areas saw a massive influx of users during the height of the pandemic, and many of those Iowans have continued to buy licenses and make outdoor recreation a part of their regular activities. In addition

to the license itself, hunters and anglers are spending money on gear, fuel, lodging and food.

But as any hunter can attest, few things are as discouraging as pulling up to your desired location to find someone has beaten you there. While full parking lots at outdoor spaces are generally a good thing, it's a clear sign we're not yet meeting the need.

Guides and outfitters, liveries and concessionaires, owners of rental cabins or campgrounds, even photographers or artists rely on there being ample places to get outdoors.

In 2005, Darrin Siefken chose Waverly as the location for what would become a successful outfitting business, *CrawDaddy Outdoors*. Bremer County's parks and water trails would provide a backdrop for gear rental, guide services or classes, and Darrin was determined to prove to himself that the small town of Waverly — just over

9,000 people at the time — could support his business idea.

"The business didn't just attract locals — I estimate I had about a 3-hour reach," Darrin says.

He says that reach is even farther now, magnified by increased park usage during and following the pandemic. But growth for these types of businesses relies on more places to get outdoors.

"*CrawDaddy* absolutely would not be viable without the parks, trails and wildlife areas we have locally," Darrin says. "Even the few locations we have are clearly playing a role in economic development for this community."

Darrin and his wife Janeen recently sold their business to fellow Waverly residents, who under Darrin's continued guidance are excited to expand the community of nature lovers in northeast Iowa.

Public lands benefit our mental and physical health

Healthy environments make for healthy people. Dr. Matthew H. E. Mutel Browning, Associate Professor at Clemson University and a native Midwesterner, has made a career studying the mental and physical benefits of the outdoors.

Areas with access to nature see a multitude of benefits, including lower rates of cardiovascular disease, all-cause mortality, depressive and anxiety symptoms, and better birth outcomes for mom or baby.

"Natural areas tend to have high levels of biodiversity, both in the plants and animals but also in the communities of micro-organisms," Matt explains. "Some of the bacteria in the soil and air co-evolved with humans. Our gut, skin and other body parts benefit from these healthy communities that we breathe in and ingest tiny amounts of when we have a little dirt

on our hands after being outside."

Matt shared that experimental research shows that even a short time in nature can help curb cravings and boost self-discipline, helping people make healthier food choices. And natural environments have a way of allowing areas of the brain associated with concentration and decision-making to recover from fatigue.

"We are predisposed to have an emotional and even chemical bond to be in these places and around plants, animals and other living things," Matt says.

Iowa's latest Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), a five-year framework for outdoor recreation priorities in Iowa, asked respondents what personal benefits they receive from recreating outdoors:

- A sense of peace, relaxation or stress relief (95%)
- Positive family activities (92%)
- Mental or emotional health (92%)
- Health and fitness (93%)
- Healthy childhood development (86%)
- The healing power of the outdoors (85%)
- Adventure or challenging activities (75%)

According to the 2023 Cancer in Iowa report produced by the Iowa Cancer Registry and State Health Registry of Iowa, we are the only state in the nation with a significantly rising cancer rate, with the second highest rate overall. The cause of the rising rates aren't clear, but we do know that high levels of nitrate in drinking water increases risk for cancer and birth defects. So, it's important to be proactive in protecting our environment and water.



Visitors to Preparation Canyon in the Loess Hills enjoy picturesque views

Photo by Travel Iowa

More Iowans need access to public lands

We're living in an unprecedented time where your employment doesn't necessarily determine where you live.

"More and more people have jobs that allow them to work from anywhere, so we need to give them a reason to choose Iowa," explains Dennis Goemaat, Linn County Conservation's Executive Director. "People are deciding where they want to go based on what they can do when they get there. We have to think about what people want to do after work. Are we

providing enough opportunity?"

Iowans can't reap all the mental and physical health benefits if the parks, trails and wildlife areas are out of reach.

"I live on a quarter-acre lot in town, and when I want to recreate, I have to go somewhere to do that — I don't have a choice," Dennis Goemaat continues. "There are far more people in that situation than we talk about. How do we meet their needs so they do have places to go?"

Iowa's latest SCORP reports that people prefer to travel 10 miles or less to participate in outdoor recreation. It also showed that lack of access or opportunity and not knowing where to go were in the top five reasons someone did not participate in outdoor recreation in the last two years.

The farther Iowans have to travel for access to nature, the fewer personal benefits of parks, trails and wildlife areas they'll see.

Public lands can impact environmental health

Among the stacked benefits of our remaining prairies, woodlands, wetlands and other open spaces are the important ecosystem services they provide, like removing and preventing air and water pollution. Thoughtful placement or restoration of natural ecosystems paired with other mitigation can have a tangible impact on environmental health.

In addition to improving water quality by filtering contaminants, protected land

in strategic places can also combat water quantity issues by holding water in times of drought and holding water back during flooding. The frequency and magnitude of flooding are projected to increase in Iowa in the 21st century. Iowa's resiliency to these floods will depend on the combination of protected land and the adaptability of our policies and practices.

A recent study from IHR—Hydroscience and Engineering at the

University of Iowa found 450,000 acres of row crop located within our state's 2-year floodplain. This means in any given year there's a 50:50 chance of that land being flooded. Not only does that increase soil loss and contaminants in our water, but on average, \$230 million dollars in crops are lost to floods each year. The effects of heavy rain events can be mitigated with the right land-based solutions, including putting habitat on vulnerable ground.

Plants and wildlife also need public lands

Parks, trails and wildlife areas safeguard habitat for our wildlife and plants, an alarming number of which are in trouble.

The Iowa Wildlife Action Plan, a long-range plan for conserving Iowa's wildlife, found that of the 999 animal species considered (including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, land snails, mussels, fish, butterflies, dragonflies and

damsel flies), nearly a third of them met the criteria to be listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need. That means that without help, their populations are at risk of declining enough to be considered threatened or endangered.

The full plan is available on the Iowa Department of Natural Resources website, but of particular note is that 100% of our freshwater mussel species meet those

criteria. They need protected outdoor spaces just as much as we do, along with the nearly 400 plant species found in Iowa that are now classified as endangered, threatened or of special concern.

We are rapidly losing the diverse wild lives that call Iowa home, but it is not too late to do something about it. The power to protect them lies in our decisions about how we treat the land and water.



Photos provided by the Peterson family.

IN TRIBUTE – A BROTHERLY BOND

Brothers Lloyd and Robert (Bob) Peterson grew up enjoying the outdoors, and the trout streams of northeast Iowa were their playground. When Lloyd passed away in 2020, his family chose to contribute his memorial funds to the protection and enhancement of North Bear Creek, a pristine northeast Iowa trout stream that embodied his love of the land, water and outdoor lifestyle. It was a fitting legacy.

It felt so fitting that Lloyd's brother, Bob, decided that when the time came, he also wanted his memorials to leave a legacy for the land. Following his passing in the spring of 2023, his wife and family directed tribute gifts to INHF to support that same trout stream.

These generous gifts are made even more special by the bond these brothers shared during their lifetimes and now share through their conservation legacy. North Bear Creek will flourish under the stewardship of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and the thoughtful generosity of Lloyd and Bob Peterson.

If you or your loved ones feel connected to Iowa's land, water and wildlife you can create a conservation legacy with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Contributing to the protection and restoration of places in Iowa that hold special meaning to you will ensure these places can be shared and enjoyed by generations to come. You can direct memorial or tribute gifts to a special place in Iowa or contribute to the purpose and mission of Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to protect and restore Iowa's land, water and wildlife statewide.

If you are interested in exploring a gift, contact Planned Giving and Major Gifts Officer Stacie Couvillon at scouvillon@inhf.org or 515-288-1846, ext. 45.

— STACIE COUVILLON, *Planned Giving and Major Gifts Officer*

TRIBUTE GIFTS

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mark C. Ackelson | Neil Hamilton | Cal Muller | Jill Schreiber |
| Austin & Naomi | Mike & Max Havlik & Amy Yoakum | Thomas Murphy | Henry Schuerer |
| Curtis & Marie Bader | Patrick Campbell Henry | Anita O'Gara | Denise Sheehan |
| Chuck Baker | Jerry Hilgenberg | Jeanne Wolken Orstad | Julie Sievers |
| Carol Barnes | Sally Hood | Dennis Ostwinkle | Ginger Soelberg |
| Sandra Baugé | Dr. Lynn Huebler | Sandra Ostwinkle | Robert Jiggs Stonewall |
| Terry Baxter | Leighton & Peter Jackson | Steve Padgitt | John Strain |
| Don Beneke | Jan Johnson | Edgar Peterson | Delano & Margaret Jespersen |
| John & Barbara Bergren | The Jones/Leggett Family | Lyel Pfeiler | Christine Tew |
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| Erinn Fry | Sherie L. McLaren | Marvin Saathoff | John West |
| Jennifer Garst | Kristen Morrow | Earl & Isabelle Salterberg | Bill and JoAnn Wiedmann |
| The Garst Family | Mountain's Top Watermark'n Woody MH QA2 | James R. (Dick) Sampel | Geitel Winakor |
| Arthur Glenmore Razor | Mountain's Top Wooden Nickel MH | Tylar Samuels | John & Patrice Winkel |
| Walter B. Gronert | Mountain's Top G.O.A.T. QA2 | Walt & Jane Saur | Miriam Woods |
| Peg & Gregg Gustafson | Mountain's Top Beggar MH | Thomas Scherer | David Zahrt |
| Luke Haller | HRCH Mountain's Top Sage MH QA2 | Paul Schneberger | Gary Zeman |
| Khanh & Neil Hamilton | | James Schneberger | |

Bumble Bee Watch

BY ERICA PLACE
Communications Specialist | eplace@inhf.org

Rusty patched bumblebee
Photo by Larry Reis



For a month or so following spring's arrival, every bumble bee buzzing by is a queen. She — and her other fertile female siblings — were the only ones from last year's colony to overwinter, finding refuge in an underground burrow, amongst fallen leaves or tucked away in a brush pile. Early blooming flowers, trees and shrubs (like our woodland ephemerals mentioned on page 4) provide the meals they'll need to begin building their new queendom, which will grow throughout the summer and produce more queens destined to singlehandedly start anew the following year.

Sixteen of North America's 46 bumble bee species call Iowa home, and at least ¼ of them are at risk of extinction due to environmental factors like lack of food resources, excessive lawn, exposure to chemicals, availability of nesting and overwintering sites, competition from honeybees and more. Bumble bees are important pollinators of both crops and native

plants, and their decline can have significant agricultural and ecological costs.

Scientists are trying to gather baseline data to learn more about how bumble bee populations and ranges are changing and are asking for your help through a community science project called Bumble Bee Watch.

Bumble Bee Watch is simple: just start snapping photos anytime (and anywhere) you see a bumble bee! Upload the photos, using the website's resources to identify the species as best you can. Scientists will double check your identification, and your sightings are added to a country-wide database that will help inform conservation decisions. It's an easy way for you and your family to virtually care for these pollinators. Browse current Iowa sightings and set up your account at bumblebeewatch.org.

DID YOU KNOW...



Color patterns and size not only help you identify the species, but whether a bee is a queen, a female or worker, or a male.



Bumble bees only make a small amount of honey to use in case they can't get food in bad weather.



Bumble bees are usually docile and unlikely to sting unless provoked. Plus, only female bumble bees are capable of stinging.





Iowa
Natural Heritage
Foundation

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A Tennessee Warbler perches on the blooming branch of an American plum. This warbler was likely searching for a snack amongst the spring blooms. Tennessee Warblers (*Leiothlypis peregrina*) are primarily insectivores with caterpillars comprising most of their diet. *Photo by Larry Reis*

